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AUTHOR Gillis, Miriam
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ABSTRACT

A comparative analysis evaluated three studies that dealt with the differences among five-year-olds that should be considered before reading instruction is initiated in kindergarten. The premise of the comparison was that children from different countries (especially Israel, where these studies were conducted), have different abilities, react differently to reading instruction (sometimes bright children are late readers, for example), and differ in the acquisition of skills in the reading processes. Two of the studies, by Moshe Kochba and Sara Smilansky, examined and reinforced the efficiency of early reading through actual reading instruction, while the third study by Yaacov Rand concluded only that the regular process of acquisition of the Hebrew basic lexical skills can be started earlier than the age of six. Analysis of the studies' findings suggests that unanswered questions about reading instruction in kindergarten remain. Specific and differentiated reading readiness programs may be more effective than a general approach to early formal reading. Such a program could serve as a diagnostic tool to detect special needs of children who could be helped by a closed attached accompanying readiness program linking readiness and reading skill. It would also be preferable to involve parents of all five-year-olds in a specific readiness program rather than in assisting formal reading instruction. (References are attached.) (NKA)

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Dr. Miriam Gillis

School of Education

Bar-Ilan University, ISRAEL

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Critical Re-examination of Research in Early Reading Instruction and its Applications

Who is the 5 year old child - when reading instruction is considered? Is he a " little grown up" or is he an individual personality who has the right to be 5 years old, to behave, learn, be curious and react according to his talents, way of upbringing and his own pace of development.

These questions require a three folded, hierarchially structured answer when speaking about reading:

1) Children come from different countries or areas (especially in Israel); they have different abilities/disabilities and their experiences are different in quality and quantity;

2) Children react differently to reading instruction: There are bright children who are late readers, and dull ones who acquire the foundations of reading within an astonishingly short period.

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3) Children differ in the sequence of skills they acquire in the reading process: While certain children read fluently but with errors, other stumble over most simple words, but have a high rate of comprehension; and again some of them make carefully integrated progress in reading (1).

It may be that these facts cause the controversity about beginning reading. In many countries reading starts with six year olds in the first grade (such as France, Germany, USA and others); in England they start as early as 5 years (since 1870), while the Scandinavian countries postpone first reading until 7 or even 8 years (Denmark) (2). In Israel, at the beginning of the century, with the modernization and secularisation of the educational system, there occurred a gradual (but never exclusive) transition from traditional-religious reading in the so-called "Heder" for 3-4 year old kids to "late" reading instruction at the age of 6. Kindergartens were already established about 50 years before the State of Israel (3) and became more and more "5 years-old child-oriented". The prevailing philosophy then was that of the "whole child" connected with profound respect for the needs of the "tender" age and a not reading oriented readiness-program. This attitude continued into the first grade creating a child-oriented core curriculum and the whole sentence reading approach, starting with the classical, and in my opinion beautiful sentence: Shalom kita aleph - שלום כתה א' - welcome first graders.

After the establishment of the State of Israel (1948) and the integration of thousands of oriental children in the Israeli educational system (which was by no means identical with integration in the already existing schools) a high rate of reading failure (50-70%) shocked the educational authorities. A special committee for "culturally disadvantaged" children tried to overcome this problem with the help of three programs:

1) Newly devised, carefully structured, mostly synthetic reading programs for first graders (4);

2) Remedial teaching for 3rd to 5th graders, mainly based on the global "language experience approach";

3) Reading instruction for 5 years olds in the kindergarten, leading to three experimental field studies:

   a) Kochba's study published in 1966 (5);

   b) Smilansky's study (together with Sh'fatja) published in 1972 (6).

   c) Rand's study published in 1976 (7):

They will be shortly presented in their chronological order.

a) Kochba

3 kindergartens were chosen, one of underpreviliged children and two of high standard population, that is - 105 children and their matching control groups. The children were taught 45 words and syllables through an analytic-synthetic approach during five months, allowing 4-7% of the play-time for reading instruction. Research methods consisted of observation, readiness tests and reading tests.

The results:

* No anxiety or stress in the overall atmosphere was noted.
* The scores in the readiness test rose significantly. This is in accordance with Walcutt (1961) (8) and Chall (1967) (9), that "dealing" with letters and words increases reading readiness.
* About 10% of the children learned to read; 20% knew some of the words or the syllables. A third (part) of all the children did not read anything.
* Furthermore about 15% of them showed open resistance to reading.
* Most children had various degrees of writing difficulties due to lack of fine eye-hand coordination, which is normal to this age.

But those questions which were left open needed the most considerations:

* Why any child should experience a sense of failure at the age of 5 - if he had more chances for successfull learning a year later.
* Why should he spend two years learning a thing which he (probably) could master within one year only.
* Why should he feel "a failure", suffering from low selfesteem, knowing that excellent achievement in drawing, acting, building and

even talking is not recognized by his parents, teachers and friends as worthy as reading a few words.

* Do we create emotional reading difficulties, putting the child into an unfair situation of learning-to-read competition; Unfair, because he is mature and ready "only" in accordance with his age of 5, and not pretending to act as a six-year-old.

b) Smilansky

These same questions could be asked after a much broader, more sophisticated and well planned research of Smilansky, relying on what she considered as "the compacity of 5-year olds for abstract thinking" - and therefore excluding the need for any associations and special readiness-program. Furthermore, she considered kindergarten-reading as a "trivial question", relying on the old Jewish tradition of very early reading. More than 700 five year olds took part in the experiment (not including the control groups).

Children with I.Q.'s ranging from 89-99 were considered low subjects. Children with I.Q.'s ranging from 100-132 were considered high subjects. All of them came from the central Tel-Aviv area.

Two different reading approaches were administered:

* One beginning with whole words of regular sound patterns, similar to Bloomfield's linguistic approach starting with: Can Dan fan Nan (10)? (Likewise in Hebrew: Dana nama ba-sapa). The words were immediately broken down into their components.
* The same material was used as a phonetic approach beginning with syllables, which were immediately composed to words of the same linguistic pattern.

But the discussion or the critiques were neither focused on the use of the two non-typical approaches, which led to contraversial outcomes in group of different sex and I.Q. - nor in the published results of rather remarkable progress in comprehension, time concept and the ability to read little stories composed of the above mentioned patterned words.

What is of concern is the widening gap (according to Smilansky herself) between the reader and the non-reader (only 50% knew how to read words and only 36% were able to read and comprehend a "patterned" story), and therefore the "failers" had to repeat the same learning experience, once again a year later, starting now with a sense of failure. According to Smilansky the teachers did not feel any change of the relaxed atmosphere in the kindergartens (which is very much cultivated in Israeli kindergartens); but an anonymous questionaire administered three years later, revealed the burden and stress sensed by the kindergarten teachers.

c) Rand

The third research was carried out by Rand in 1976, on an entirely different basis. While Kochba and Smilansky tried to prove the efficiency of early reading through actual reading instruction, Rand only came to the conclusion, "that the regular process of acquisition of the Hebrew basic lexic skills can be started earlier than the age of six".

In his research 319 kindergarten and school-children from different oriental culturally deprived groups were tested on the Edfeld's reversal-test (11) and the developmental figures reproductive test.

Rand's starting point was the assumption, that shape discrimination which characterizes the Hebrew alphabet is more rudimentary than discrimination based upon relational variables, which are essential in the Latin Alphabet.

That is: The visual perception, as in the Hebrew letters, of long-short (ו-ן) , broad-narrow (כ-ב) and other tiny differences (as ח-ת) is developed earlier than the visual mirror image, as left right (p-q, d-b); upside-down (t-f, n-u, m-w) etc., in the Latin one.

Our questions concerning this research are not focused on the observed writing difficulties before the age of six, as Rand took into account "the necessity of proper neuro-muscular development" for this skill. We are concerned about the unsufficient presentation of the Hebrew reading elements. Rand discussed only the consonants of the Hebrew Alphabet: but the difficulties are mainly caused by the pointed vowel-system which in itself and in relation to the consonants require space orientation abilities as: up-down (וִ-יִ); left-right (בְּ-בַּ); and therein the more difficult diversions (בַּ-בָּ-בָ) and this - in addition to tiniest shape discriminations (12).

Other questions are: Is reading only or mainly visual perception or only "letter perception"? According to professional literature reading is connected to letter sequence and word shapes, to symbolic presentation of sounds, to content and knowledge and to language and thought. Therefore the assumption that teaching Hebrew reading is "easy" for young children, is not really justified and it may wrongly influence over-enthusiastic educators to precipitate the early reading decision.

However, when summarizing these three studies from a broader point of view we may state: The general purpose of these and many other research-studies in early reading is certainly to improve reading ability and to make the process of its acquisition easier, quicker and more sufficient and these clear-cut good intentions are certainly not to be criticized. Nevertheless, the risk of early reading is still high predictable for many children, especially for the weaker population, as groups and as individuals. Therefore, if I dare to say "no" to formal reading instruction in the kindergarten, it does not follow to say "no" to a reading environment. The child should be surrounded by books with inspiring dynamic pictures, by movable letters and word labels. He should be read to and experience that his teacher looks up in a book for certain information and is laughing while reading a joke. If the child asks about a letter, a word or its meaning, he definately must get the right and exact answer. But this should not be interpretated as the obligate turning point for beginning formal reading lessons. Durkin (14) states that five year olds are changing rather abruptly their fields of interest: From letters to numbers and counting, from building blocks to animals and the wonder of growing plants and to other exciting experiences. We can confirm this statement after a long-continuing study, observing forty kindergartens in Israel.

As to the above mentioned reading environment - it belongs to the reading readiness program which should be imbedded in the general or over-all readiness program. As these subjects are rather known and much discussed (15), I would like to go a step further in three directions:

1) Specific readiness;

2) Accompanying readiness;

3) Parents' readiness.

1) Specific reading readiness means readiness according to a specific reading program: In every district the use of a number of basal readers is dominant, everyone characterized by its contents, pictures, emphasis on certain word-attacking skills, amount of repetitions, etc.

I would like to suggest, to broaden the general reading readiness program to a specific one - according to the foreseen reading method, as for instance: the dolls and animals in the kindergarten could carry the funny or unusual names of the characters in the basal; in the puppet-show children may learn to use all the artificially patterned sentences, so often found in basal readers - and even more often critizised (16); children may play with lotto-cards presenting the pictures of the basals, usual and unusual; they can learn to link between colour and sound, to differenciate sounds in words or, if a global approach is foreseen, they may be helped to discover the beauty of the most simple language rule, suggested by Bereiter (17): "Every word has a beginning and an end".

The child, thus coming prepared to school, will probably make a more smooth-running transfer from spoken to written language:

* Because of the close connection between the readiness and the reading material;;
* Because of the confidence he feels about the known things from his kindergarten;
* Because we are eliminating the minor difficulties in the readiness-

program and are helping him focus on the most important new factor - the written word and its meaning.

2) Accompanying readiness: The above mentioned basal-connected specific readiness program serves in a certain way as a diagnostic tool as well. The kindergarten teacher can observe the difficulties of certain readiness-skills of a child, such as: fixation to word patterns, resistance to unusal spoken words (Dad-Daddy), lack of memory for new names, problems of figure-ground and figure sound perception, etc. This information can be passed on to the reading teacher at school, who can consequently practice these specific readiness skills - though not as usual as an over-all readiness program before starting to read - but rather, in direct connection with the learning unit in the primer. That is - the readiness skill is attached to the reading skill, the former serving as a direct and close transfer agent to reading. (18)

3) Parents' readiness: The last, but not least proposal is, what I call "parents' readiness", that is - to build a differentiated basal-readers readiness program, in which even illiterate and persons who have never attended school can take part. Let's explain to them the structure and the content of the foreseen reader and guide them to play, talk and activate readiness such as; teaching the songs and little poems of the reader, how to accompany them with rythmical pencil or hand movements, play memory games or lotto with cards presenting the pictures of the spoken vocabulary of the reading program, and guide them, how to ask comprehension-questions about a short story. This guidance should be given accordingly to the specific

needs of the child and the abilities of the parent, as assessed by the teacher. In an informal pretest in a parents' readiness program preceding the "Levanon" (19) reading program, the cooperation in what the parents call "readiness-play" was astonishingly high. Not the exactness of decoding was in their "homework" responsibility, but the spoken word, the talked communication and the picture-soundand-rhyme play. In this context there was not failure nor error, but trying again and again to "play"; consequently the often observed atmosphere of parental nervousness about reading errors of the child in the beginning reading steps was much more relaxed. This program should be tried in a more structured way incorporating childrens' hours in the television program (like Sesame Street).

Summary: Three different research projects were shortly presented, all of them connected to early reading. Not their results, but rather the unaswered questions were discussed. The underlying assumption of this presentation was, that 5-year olds include different children with different needs, coming from various backgrounds. Therefore specific and differentiated readiness programs may be less risky than a general approach to early formal reading. Furthermore the specific readiness program can serve as a diagnostic tool to detect special needs of children who will be helped by a closed attached accompanying readiness program, linking between readiness and reading skill. On the other hand it seems preferable to involve parents of all groups in a specific readiness program rather than in assistance to formal reading instruction. The pretest serves as an indicator, that the program is worthwhile to be carried out and in a well-planned cooperative research project.

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